

South Cumberland Recreation Area: A Tennessee Treasure Turns 30



By Mary Patten Priestley

Line up the firecrackers - get the band together - we've got a celebration going on! South Cumberland State Recreation Area, which includes some of the most beautiful and pristine land in the state, is celebrating 30 years.

That's 30 years of habitat protection for the rare Cumberland Rosinweed, the endangered Tennessee Cave Salamander, the tiny Hooded Warbler, the massive Yellow Poplars of the old growth forests, and more.

And it's 30 years of the wilderness experience for hikers, backpackers, birders, and anyone hankering for the "tonic of wildness," as Henry David Thoreau called it. Yes, it's definitely time to pop open the bubbly and toast the farsighted conservationists through whose determination we have been blessed with this magnificent wilderness park for 30 years and counting.

An Ancient Natural Heritage and a Rich Cultural History

Where to begin? Two hundred and fifty thousand years ago, geological forces uplifted the Cumberland Plateau from the sea and rivulets of water began to etch the channels that chiseled steep-sided, bluff-encrusted Savage Gulf and Fiery Gizzard. Water sculpted the Sewanee Natural Bridge and hollowed out the Carter Caves.

Then, 10,000 years ago, the most recent ice age forced northern plants to these southern highlands where they found refuge in the deep gorges and sheltered coves. Today South Cumberland, with its varied landscape and numerous habitats, is home to over one third of the plant species known to the state, including several species of rare and endangered plants and animals.

Settlement of the South Cumberland began in earnest in the 19th century. The spectacular beauty and cool summers made it the ideal location for the Methodist Assembly and the resort community established at Monteagle and Beersheba Springs. A Swiss colony settled at Gruetli, and the Episcopal Church founded The University of the South at Sewanee.

The land was poor for farming, but it held natural resources. About 150 years ago, coal was discovered near Tracy City, and for a time it was king here. Around the turn of the century the coal seam played out, but the coke ovens at Grundy Lakes remain, strange and silent monuments to that time.

Forestry also played an important role in the economics of the area. Most of the plateau, including much of the park, has been logged. But because of a twist of fate one 500-acre forest, dominated by a complex assemblage of massive trees, remained deep in Savage Gulf. This remote forest was reputed to be old-growth mixed mesophytic, an example of what is thought to be the "parent" of all the rest of the eastern deciduous forest. A team of botanists, led by renowned plant ecologist Dr. Elsie Quartermann of Vanderbilt, visited the site several times in 1970-1971 to inventory the plant species in search of evidence that the forest was truly as significant as it was purported to be. Middle Tennessee State University's Dr. Tom Hemmerly, a member of that team, describes the work: "It was over 30 years ago now that we were drawn to this special place along the western edge of the Cumberland Plateau. Our goal was to analyze the vegetation of this reputed virgin forest. We made our way downward from the sandstone rim of Savage Gulf into its forested depths." And there they did indeed discover a pristine old-growth mixed mesophytic forest.

As a result of their findings, Savage Gulf was designated a national natural landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior. Its selection for protection under Tennessee's Natural Areas Act set in motion the stringing together of the pearls that form this park: Savage, Big Creek and Collins Gulfs; Grundy Forest, Foster Falls and the Small Wild Area in Fiery Gizzard; Grundy Lakes; Sewanee Natural Bridge; Carter Caves;

and Hawkins Cove.

On the landscape level, the Savage Gulf complex and the Fiery Gizzard are incredibly important ecologically. Migrating birds like the Hooded Warbler need large stretches of unbroken forest to thrive. "The key thing is the lack of fragmentation [of these forests]. That's absolutely critical and one of the reasons why big chunks of land like Savage Gulf are so important," explains Dr. David Haskell, biology professor at Sewanee.

The Heroes

Who do we have to thank for this gift? Certainly the landowners like the Greeters, Savages, Werners, and Winslows who understood the value of conservation. And the botanists who documented the unique character of this place: Margaret Rhinehart, Elsie Quarterman, Eugene Wofford, and Ross Clark.

The conservationists set forth the cogent arguments for protection groups like the Middle Tennessee Conservancy Council and the Savage Gulf Preservation League, and individuals like Herman Baggenstoss, Wallace Bigbee, Mack Prichard, and Governor Winfield Dunn under whose tenure the conservation efforts all came together. The Nature Conservancy was an important player, enabling the purchase of 5,000 acres in Savage Gulf. And the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which administers Foster Falls and the Small Wild Area in conjunction with the state, formulated a master plan for preservation of all of these priceless natural areas.

Visiting South Cumberland

The park today offers a variety of outdoor recreational experiences. John Christof, park manager here for over 20 years, oversees its 16,000 acres. "If you have to work for a living, this is a good job for a nature lover," he says. South Cumberland is a natural classroom for the numerous school groups and other visitors. Rangers present interpretive programs and lead recreational activities year-round.

The wilderness areas are managed with a deep commitment to protecting the diverse and fragile ecology. In those areas, only low-impact, non-consumptive recreation is permitted. Eighty five miles of backcountry trails, several of which have won awards for their beauty, lead hikers to spectacular waterfalls like Greeter, Horsepound, Boardtree, and Savage. Others trace the rugged cliffs to dramatic overlooks like the Great Stone Door, Alum Bluff, and Raven Point. Primitive campgrounds are strategically located to make the farthest reaches of the gorges accessible to the hardest backpacker.

The park also provides a variety of day-use activities: canoeing and hiking at Grundy Lakes; rock climbing at the Great Stone Door and Foster Falls; even basketball and tennis at the visitors center. Altogether, it serves some one million visitors each year. Christof comments: "It's great to see little children excited about their first backpacking experience with their parents, or a mom belaying her son as he climbs a route at Foster Falls. I love to see happy groups of visitors energized by learning from a ranger."

When you go, do not expect to find an inn or a golf course. In fact, this is the one park in the state where a golf course was actually converted to a wildflower-studded meadow. However, overnight accommodations are available at area bed and breakfasts and motels in Monteagle and McMinnville. Beersheba Springs Methodist Assembly, perched on the edge of Savage Gulf, and duBose Conference Center, just down the road from Fiery Gizzard, host conferences, church retreats, and family reunions. Irmie Blanton, camp manager at the Methodist Assembly, which is located in the historic Beersheba Springs Hotel, says that South Cumberland is an ideal retreat for group meetings. "You can reflect and enjoy the natural beauty and return to wherever you came from with a renewed spirit."

The Challenge Ahead

Under the master plan adopted in the 1970s, the state was to make periodic purchases that would eventually create defensible boundaries for the park. However, a lack of funding has prevented the implementation of this plan.

"Thirty years ago I said the biggest obstacle facing the Savage Gulf Wilderness Park is land acquisition. It's even more urgent now," says State Naturalist Mack Prichard.

Thousands of acres of the plateau forest surrounding the park have been stripped of their native forests and planted with Loblolly Pine monocultures to feed the pulp mills. Pressures to develop the bluffs are increasing daily. Already, several homes mar the view from well-known park overlooks.

The Friends of South Cumberland have launched The Campaign for Saving Great Spaces to raise funds to preserve - either by purchase or conservation easement - the bluffs, trails, and watersheds of the park. Groups such as The Land Trust for Tennessee, which is a partner with the Friends of South Cumberland in this endeavor, can hold a conservation easement. Jean Nelson, director of The Land Trust for Tennessee, says: "A conservation easement is a great tool for people who want to keep ownership of their land and preserve its natural resources and character. If they are willing to restrict its use, in particular to limit development or some other use to promote conservation, they can do something significant for the common good and

may well receive tax benefits, both income and estate."

Woody McLaughlin, president of the Friends of South Cumberland, is confident that Tennesseans and others who love the park and know the benefits of "that tonic of wildness" will support the campaign to secure the park. A lifelong outdoorsman, McLaughlin affirms that "it's becoming more and more critical in these times for people to be able to get out and have an unspoiled wilderness experience." With the success of this campaign, our grandchildren, from whom we are actually borrowing these wild spaces, will be able to enjoy them just as we do today.

For more information about the Friends of South Cumberland, e-mail President Woody McLaughlin at: woodymcl@comcast.net.

The South Cumberland visitor's center, located on State Highway 56 between Monteagle and Tracy City, provides maps, trail information, and directions. The visitor's center phone number is 931-924-2980.

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